

# Berkeley and the Metaphor of Mental Substance

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**[[170]]** In this popular little book on the philosophy of Berkeley, G. J. Warnock suggests that “Berkeley’s observations about “spirits” have received, perhaps, more attention than they deserve; for the fact is that he had formed hardly any views at all on problems about the mind and its doings. ... It is perhaps permissible to guess that the long delay in publication of his projected second volume ... was due in part to his inability to harmonize the outlook of his early work with his theological and metaphysical beliefs. In any event he did not do this, and indeed it seems likely that it could not have been done”.<sup>2</sup>

This judgment expresses the view of Berkeley’s philosophy of mind than has become an official commonplace among philosophers. The basic contention of this view is that Berkeley’s teachings on the mind suffer both from sin of omission (he said too little) and sins of commission (what he did say was either silly or inconsistent with the rest of his philosophy). These sins are thought to be most evident in his description of the mind as a substance, a description which has endured more abuse than perhaps any other aspect of the Berkeleian philosophy. Every undergraduate knows that Berkeley’s introduction of the word “notion” to account for discourse about mental substance is merely a verbal slight of hand, an attempt to hide ignorance in mystery.

Now it is my purpose in this paper to show that the official judgment presented above is simply an instance of pious agreement serving as a shrine for falsehood. In the following, I shall argue that spiritual substance has been made a red herring in discussions of Berkeley’s treatment of the mind. Too many commentators have capitalized on textual conflicts, making little effort to give his general view a sympathetic hearing. Thus in this paper I shall not concern myself with the textual problem of reconciling apparently conflicting passages but shall instead show how certain insights from Berkeley’s philosophy illuminate basic problems in the philosophy of mind. I shall leave the “real” historical Berkeley to scholars more capable than myself and simply argue that, from at least one interpretation of his philosophy, we can draw an intelligible and intelligent theory of the **[[171]]** mind or, more specifically, of mentalistic language. This theory, briefly characterized, is one which encourages the metaphorical use of substance language in descriptions of mental phenomena. Such use is encouraged because it allows us to focus upon important facts about persons which are too often overlooked by accounts employing Humean and behavioristic methods of reduction. After developing this theory as I see it, I shall then conclude by posing and attempting to answer what seem to me the strongest objections to the interpretation here offered.

At the outset, it must be realized that for Berkeley the important question is not really “*Is the mind in fact a substance?*” but is rather “*Should we describe the mind as if it were a substance?*” In dealing with the mind, Berkeley is extremely sensitive to the metaphysical power of metaphor — “the presentation of the facts of one category in the idioms appropriate to another”.<sup>3</sup> He realizes the power of a good metaphor to enrich our understanding and the power of a bad or unconscious metaphor to lead us hopelessly astray; and he well knows that if the paradigm of

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Professor C. M. Turbayne for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Berkeley* (Pelican Books, 1953), pp. 204, 206.

<sup>3</sup> C. M. Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962), p. 3. To my knowledge Professor Turbayne was the first commentator to recognize the central importance of metaphor in the philosophy of Berkeley. For his discussion of Berkeley’s philosophy of mind, see “Berkeley’s Two Concepts of Mind” (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Part I, 1959, pp. 85–92; Part II, 1962, pp. 383–386).

substantiality is revealed in such things as rocks and trees, then the mind is obviously not a substance. It is senseless, for example, to speak of the mind as having a shape. But to admit this obvious fact is not (though it has often been supposed to be) sufficient to discard the substantial discourse in describing mental activity. Berkeley reminds us again and again that substantial discourse about the mind should “not be understood in the gross literal sense” (*Three Dialogues*, III). “Speech is metaphorical more than we imagine — insensible things and their modes, circumstances, etc., being exprest for the most part by words borrowed from things sensible.” And the “grand mistake is that we think we have ideas of operations of our minds. Certainly this metaphorical dress is an argument we have not” (*Philosophical Commentaries*, 176 and 176a). As Nelson Goodman has recently argued,<sup>4</sup> it is vainly optimistic to think we ever reach a final word on the way the world really *is*. What is important is that we debate the relative merits of competing descriptions in an attempt to determine which of them serves the most of our major purposes. If there are good reasons for describing the mind in substantial terms, then we are justified in continuing to do so. This is the case even if Hume and like-minded people cannot, upon introspection, find or see the mind. That they **[[172]]** even attempt to do this merely reveals an uncritical acceptance of a picture theory of meaning, a propensity to confuse metaphor with literal truth.

The real debate, then, hinges upon the question of the usefulness of the substance metaphor. Does it do any work? Material substance was discarded because it served no function, all facts being accounted for adequately without it. “I have no reason for believing the existence of matter”, Berkeley tells us (*Three Dialogues*, III). Is the case comparable with spiritual substance, or do we in this case have good reasons for continuing to speak of the reality behind the appearance? Berkeley thinks that we do. But, before proceeding to his account of these reasons, I shall discuss briefly the characteristics of substance in general. This is necessary because, though we might find it desirable to describe the mind in substantial terms, conceptual difficulties may make such a description linguistically meaningless. That mental substance does not contain all of the predicates normally falling under the word “substance” has already been admitted. For this reason, it seems that the phrase “mental substance” will have to be taken in a metaphorical sense. But if we find that the phenomena of mind are such that *no* important predicates are to be held in common with substance, then even metaphor becomes impossible or, at best, useless. Metaphor demands a stretching but not a breaking of the imagination. Thus we must attempt to determine essential predicates definitive of substance.<sup>5</sup>

In an interesting article a few years back,<sup>6</sup> T. R. Miles employed some of the notions from Koffka’s *Gestalt Psychology* in an attempt to justify Berkeley’s use of the word “substance” in describing the mind. Koffka believes that “we may single out three characteristics of things which will severally and jointly be characteristics of things: shaped boundedness, dynamis properties, and constancy”.<sup>7</sup> With few reservations, most people would probably accept these three characteristics as the central attributes of substance. Granting that, in ordinary language, these attributes reflect conditions which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for substance or thinghood, does the mind thereby gain admission into the world of real things? Though partially in a metaphorical sense, it seems that it does. For though minds do not have shaped boundaries, they most certainly *do* have constancy and dynamic properties. “We live through a period of time and we can *make* things happen.”<sup>8</sup> Considering the presence of these **[[173]]** two properties, we are thus not completely running riot with language if we speak of the mind in substantial terms. As Berkeley reminds us it would be ‘dangerous to make “idea” [i. e. “perceptual object”] and “thing” convertible; it were the way to prove that spirits are nothing’

<sup>4</sup> “The Way the World Is”, *Review of Metaphysics*, September 1960, pp. 48–56.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of “substance” which I shall use throughout is a very broad one. It combines elements of both *ousia* and *upokeimenon* in that it is to be both a substratum and a single existing thing.

<sup>6</sup> “Berkeley and Ryle: Some Comparisons”, *Philosophy*, 1952, pp. 58–71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

(*Philosophical Commentaries*, 872). If we find the substance metaphor useful, then linguistic considerations alone will not serve to rule it out of court.

But is the metaphor useful? The answer that Berkeley gives to this question is an unqualified yes. The reason why it is so is contained implicitly in the above ascription of dynamic properties to persons. It is the presence of these dynamic properties, specifically those of *agency*, that demands a substantial description of the mind. For agency demands that I distinguish between myself and states of myself, a distinguish that has no intelligible counterpart in discourse about physical objects. Indeed, the absence of certain kinds of dynamic properties in physical objects might provide sufficient grounds to argue that in calling a rock a substance we are here too speaking metaphorically! At any rate, Berkeley does believe that self-generated activity is a literal fact about persons and that such activity is ascribed only metaphorically to physical objects. ‘*Solicitation* and *effort* or *conation* belong properly to animate beings alone. When they are attribute to other things, they must be taken in a metaphorical sense’ (*De Motu*, 3). We know, by introspection or direct awareness, that we are self-moving creatures. This, as a basic fact about persons, must find its place in the structure of any acceptable description of mind.

Perhaps this point can be made most forcefully by a kind of *reduction ad absurdum*. We may ask what it would be like if we did not employ the substance metaphor but decided instead to let the “I” in my self-referring statements function simply as a name for all of the physical and conscious activities occurring together at a certain time and place. On this analysis, there is no distinction between myself and states of myself. Could I, in the terms of such a behavioristic approach, account for all the philosophically important differentiations that I should like to make? It seems that I could not.

The reason that I could not may be seen in a consideration of capacity statements such as ‘I can move my finger’. Now for Berkeley statements about physical objects are all in principle translatable into statements about actual or possible presentations.<sup>9</sup> To say of something that it is a physical object is to say that it would support subjunctive conditionals of a form ‘It would do so and so if...’ **[[174]]** The realization that this is the case forms a large part of Berkeley’s rejection of material substance. When dealing with objects, appearances always suffice to allow us to say all that we want to say. Material substance could make no difference one way or another.

In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now (*Principles*, 20). For you neither perceive matter objectively, as you do an inactive being or idea, nor know it, as you do yourself by a reflex act (*Three Dialogues*, III).

To say of a plate, for example, that ‘It can break’ is really to say ‘It would break, if...’ But this is not the case with persons. For in dealing with persons there is at least *one more fact* to be accounted for than is the case with objects, the fact of power or agency. The very ‘substance of a spirit is that it acts, causes, wills, operates’ (*Philosophical Commentaries*, 829). To say ‘Jones can move his finger’ is not simply to say ‘Jones would move his finger, if...’<sup>10</sup> The reason that this will not do as an analysis is that presentations of appearance are not sufficient to ascribe agency. A tree’s waving its branches is equivalent to its branches waving, and to say (A) ‘The tree can move its branches’ is only to say (B) ‘The tree’s branches can move’. But it is quite obvious that the statement (C) ‘I can move my finger’ is *not* equivalent to the statement (D) ‘My finger can move’. Anyone who doubts this can simply consider the testing procedures whereby

<sup>9</sup> In the Berkeleian philosophy these presentations are, of course, potential only for human beings. For God they are always actual.

<sup>10</sup> This was conclusively shown by J. L. Austin in his ‘Ifs and Cans’ (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1956, 109–32).

we might establish the truth or falsity of the given statements. The same test that would confirm (A) would confirm (B), but different tests would be required to confirm (C) from those required to confirm (D). If my finger twitches involuntarily from a nervous disorder, it is certainly true that my finger can move. But it is just as certainly false that *I* can move it, for the movement of my finger is not under my control at all. (D) is a necessary condition for (C), but there is no equivalence. What this illustrates is that there is a sense of power or agency connected with persons that is absent in discourse about physical objects, and this agency demands that a different account be given of persons than that given for objects. It is up to me whether or not I move my finger, but there is no real sense in which it is 'up to' tree whether or not it will move its branches.<sup>11</sup>

Thus any analysis that would make myself identical with states of myself will inevitably have to deny real agency to persons. Berkeley, [[175]] however, taking agency as an indisputable basic fact, felt the necessity of denying any 'parity of case between spirit and matter' (*Three Dialogues*, III). And those philosophers who do start from this basic fact or who do take moral responsibility seriously have found it necessary to speak of a substantial self, a self as a *purus actus*. I hope that I have shown that the reasons for such postulation are, contrary to what has generally been supposed, good reasons. Before closing, however, I should like to consider briefly three possible objections to the view that I have been presenting.

I. Objection: The claim is here being made that Berkeley employing the metaphor of substance in describing the mind. But, as philosophers, should we not be interested in the *literal* truth about mental activity, leaving metaphor to poets and novelists?

This objection lacks the apparent force that it might have had a few years ago, for several recent studies have demonstrated the central and legitimate importance of metaphor in metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> The metaphorical element in metaphysics has been acknowledged for some time, but the understanding of its cognitive legitimacy has been long in coming. It was characteristics of logical positivism, for example, to stress the metaphorical element in metaphysics but to characterize it as '*mere* metaphor'. But no constructive use was made of an insight gleaned. From recognition of the presence of metaphor there came too quickly a recognition of nonsense, lack of cognitive meaning, and emotional outbursts. Metaphysics was classed as a kind of poetry.

Only recently has this blind alley been by-passed through a new consideration of the nature of metaphysics itself. It can no longer be seen as giving *the* true description of the world. This is not because, as might be supposed, because there are no true descriptions. Rather it is because there are a great many of them. Each new description, each new metaphor, gives us (to use Black's words) a new *filter* or *screen* through which to view the world. To those who think that this is not enough, who visualize a filterless metaphysics to give the one literal description that is really true of the world, the following test should come as a shock: try to give the one literal description that is really true of your bedroom.<sup>13</sup> To those with such exalted ambitions for the whole of reality, such a task should be easy indeed! Of course, you say, the room has rectangular walls and a rectangular floor, has two windows and a door, and is painted green. But suppose I ask [[176]] further if it is sinister, or gay, or melancholy? If this is not to ask for a real description, why is it not? By what criteria is it excluded? Because these attributes are assigned by mere metaphor? But suppose that I am an expressionist painter. Are not such attributes the very ones which constitute the real room for me? Why is the room of geometry or optics to have a privileged status?

From such studies as that of Black and Turbayne, it seems that it must finally be admitted that metaphor will necessarily occur in any language that could ever claim to embody richness and depth of understanding. Wittgenstein's builders, the speakers of a "Slab there!" language

<sup>11</sup> This argument is adapted from Richard Taylor's article 'I Can' (*The Philosophical review*, 1960, pp. 78–89).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Turbayne's *Myth of Metaphor*, an excellent recent study of metaphor in philosophy is Max Black's *Models and Metaphors* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1962).

<sup>13</sup> For the full discussion of the problems involved in such a task, see Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1960), chapter I.



could dispense with it and thereby speak what might be called a literal language. But they should also dispense with any possibility of seeing the world as a whole, of fitting the brute facts of literal utterances into a general view, of seeing the slabs as parts of buildings, parts of civilizations, parts of worlds. And it is no loss that many worlds can be so constructed, that many screens arise to filter the facts. It is a gain of richness, a gain limited only by the usefulness and coherence of the metaphors employed.

The human being has many major purposes, far too many to be adequately served by one metaphor. As a scientist he is often served by the metaphor of the machine, but as a moralist he demands something more. He demands a view of man as at least partially autonomous from the mechanistic order of physical events, a view of man that does not reduce him to an object. The metaphor of mental science, used heuristically to call attention to the agency of persons, helps provide a world-view that will satisfy such a demand. Look at man, the metaphor tells us, not as you would a stone or a tree but as you would as a free, spiritual being. This does not mean, of course, that we cannot employ the machine metaphor when it serves our purposes. Indeed, it is one of the riches of our thought that we can, if we are careful, have two metaphors.

2. Objection: Berkeley's denial of parity of case between spirit and matter is based upon the capacity of persons for self-activity. Many philosophers, however, have claimed that such activity is an illusion and that any theories built upon its supposed existence must be discarded. Is not Berkeley then simply making his case for spiritual substance by assuming as obvious something which is actually quite controversial? Is he not just begging the whole question?

Berkeley does not simply assume a solution to the problem of self-activity. His position is that, though self-activity or freedom cannot be proven, skepticism about it is totally unwarranted. Our moral experience presupposes it, nothing that we know serves to refute it, and all phenomenological evidence points toward it. Only [[177]] the minutest of minute philosophers could doubt it. In the Seventh Dialogue of *Alciphron*, Berkeley asserts that 'it is... evident that man is a free agent: and though, by abstracted reasonings, you would puzzle me, and seem to prove the contrary, yet, so long as I am conscious of my own actions, this inward evidence of *plain fact* will bear me up against all your reasonings, however subtle and refined' (18). The agency of the self, then, is to be taken as a basic philosophical datum. Skepticism in regard to it is no more warranted than skepticism concerning, for example, color perception. If the chair in the next room looks red to me under proper lighting, looks red to everyone else under proper lighting, changes color appropriately for me and for everyone else under certain changed conditions, then it would be utterly absurd for me to ask: 'But is it *really* red?' This would be a pseudo-question, because the only facts that could be amassed to answer it have already been presented. We would quite rightly suspect that being 'really red', in so far as this differs from being red, is expressive of nonsense.

In like manner, if I can generally do what I intend to do, it would be very odd to ask: 'But am I *really* free?' Once again, all of the evidence that could be brought to bear on the question, specifically the fact that I can generally do what I please, has already been presented. In this context, doubt becomes absurd. For Berkeley wants to claim that it makes no sense to ask the further question of whether I can please if I please.

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ALCIPHRON. ... A philosopher goes higher, and inquires whether man be free to will.

EUPHRANOR. That is, whether he can will as he wills? I know not how philosophical it may be to ask this question, but it seems very idle. The notions of guilt and merit, justice and reward, are in the minds of men antecedent to all metaphysical disquisitions; and, according to those received natural notions, it is not doubted that man is accountable, that he acts, and is self-determinable (*Alciphron*, Seventh Dialogue, 19).

Berkeley's approach to the problem of self-activity is a foreshadowing of that taken by G. E. Moore in our own time. Like Moore, Berkeley argues that, if anything deserves to be taken as a datum for philosophy, then certainly self-activity does. For 'the power of moving our bodies we have learned by personal experience, since our mind at will can stir and stay the movements of our limbs, whatever be the ultimately explanation of the fact' (*De Motu*, 25).

3. Objection: Granting that Berkeley has good reasons for accepting self-activity, is it not still true that his use of mental substance in [\[\[178\]\]](#) accounting for this activity commits him to a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, an explanation of human action in terms of what Ryle has called the Ghost in the Machine?

When we forget that Berkeley is giving a metaphorical description of the mind, then it does indeed seem that he is speaking of ghostly mental events which cause my body to move. According to this Cartesian line of thought, the 'I' in the statement 'I move my legs' refers to an ontologically distinct kind of entity that brings about the motion of my legs. It seems to me, however, quite easy to show that Berkeley (at least on the interpretation here offered) does not hold such a position. On the contrary, his stressing of the metaphorical nature of substantial descriptions of the mind is a part of a position that represents a sophisticated alternative to Cartesianism. The metaphor of spiritual substance calls our attention to important facts about persons that are too often overlooked, and it is only when we take this metaphor literally do we fall victim to it and find ourselves postulating mental ghosts in our physical machine. Though Berkeley is never hesitant to use the words 'volition' or 'will', he is always careful to dissociate himself from a literal interpretation of them.

If you ask what thing it is that wills, I answer if you mean Idea by the word thing or any thing like any Idea, then I say tis no thing that wills. We are cheated by these general terms 'thing', 'is', etc. ... The grand cause of perplexity and darkness in treating of the will, is that we imagine it to be an object of thought (to speak with vulgar). We think we may perceive, contemplate and view it like any of our Ideas whereas in truth 'tis no idea. ... There is an homonymy in the word 'thing' when applied to Ideas and volitions (*Philosophical Commentaries*, 643 and 658).

Berkeley seems to be working toward a contextual theory of meaning for 'volition' and 'will'. We know what it means to perform a voluntary action, and the basic word is really not 'volition' the noun but 'voluntary' the adjective, an adjective we know how to apply to concrete actions. To speak of the 'will' or 'volition' as thing terms is (according to Berkeley) to speak metaphorically. When a person *does* something, his action is basic and not reducible in explanation to physical causation. The will is not a thing which causes the body to move, which uses the body in the way a carpenter uses a saw. 'I never use an instrument to lift my finger', says Berkeley, 'it being done by volition' (*Three Dialogues*, II). Perhaps the most instructive passages of all, however, occurs at *Principles* 144 where Berkeley clearly [\[\[179\]\]](#) repudiates the view of the will as a ghostly cause, one more billiard ball subject to causal action.

The will is termed the *motion* of the soul: this infuses a belief, that the mind of man is as a ball in motion, impelled and determined by the objects of sense, as necessarily as this is by the stroke of a racket. Hence arise endless scruples and errors of dangerous consequences in morality.

Having considered these three objections I think that with some confidence I may conclude that Berkeley has successfully avoided the major pitfalls opened to someone who opts for a substantial description of the mind. Berkeley's doctrine, possessing the positive features for which I have argued in the main body of the paper, thus presents a viable alternative for

behavioristic reductionism that is currently so fashionable. Behaviorism, long lacking a worthy opponent, may yet triumph. But it should not continue to do so by default.